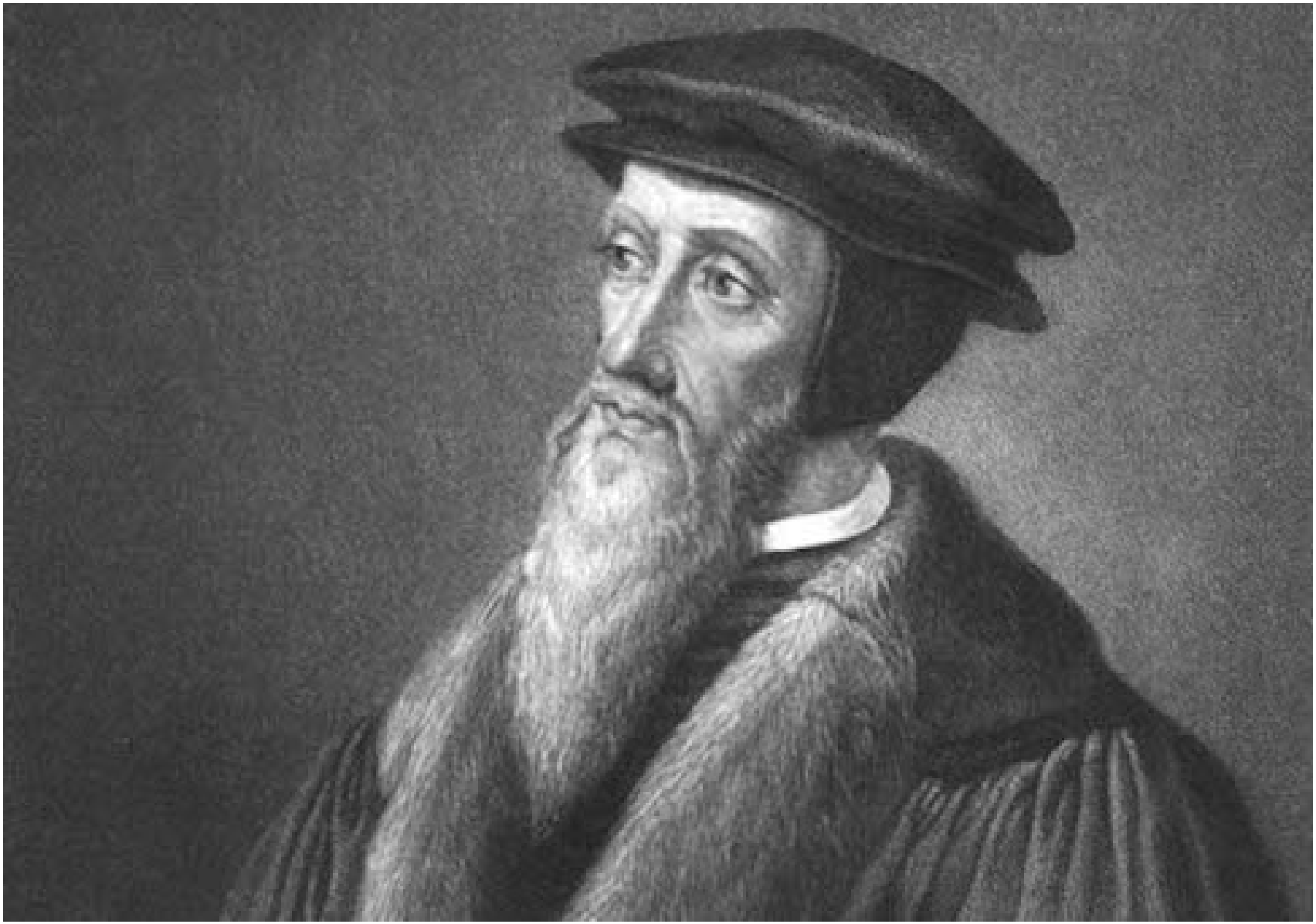
Calvin Versus Calvinism

Review: Bruce Gordon, ‘John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography’



John Calvin / Wikimedia commons

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You can run across a reference to Calvin just about anywhere. For instance, in the recent book about Chinese philosophy, *The Path*, of all places, appears the following: "… This vision of a good life is rooted in history, specifically sixteenth-century Calvinist ideas about predestination, a chosen 'elect,' and a God who has laid out a plan for each individual to fulfill." The authors add, "The Calvinists rejected the following of ritual, which they saw as empty and formulaic, and instead emphasized sincere belief in this higher deity."

Whatever else he would make of this argument, Bruce Gordon, Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Yale Divinity School, would say the writers have not summed up the thought of John Calvin (1509-1564) but of Calvinism. One of Gordon's themes is how often Calvinism has been separated from its progenitor and his major work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and then wrought into whatever the writer wants it to become, usually a whipping boy having to do with Calvin's most unpopular teaching, double predestination: some are destined for heaven, some for hell, including unbaptized infants; no Limbo, Purgatory, or other such Papism for Calvin.

Catholics and Protestants both shared, in Calvin's day, the desire to burn each other at the stake. Calvin's detractors point to his cooperation with the burning of Michael Servetus, who denied the Trinity and the efficacy of infant baptism. Gordon does not defend Calvin but notes Calvin wanted Servetus to be guillotined not burned at the stake, and the Genevan magistrates limited Calvin's role to theological adviser. "No Christian magistrates of the sixteenth century," Gordon writes, "whether Catholic or Protestant, could be seen to harbor a person who rejected Christian doctrine, in particular the nature of God."

Gordon's main point is the story of Calvin must not be confined to double predestination and the execution of Michael Servetus but, to be fair, must include the story of his *Institutes*. As his contribution to the *Lives of Great Religious Books* series, published by Princeton, Gordon's book convinces this reader that the *Institutes* is not "a dreary theological treatise by a bearded killjoy." Instead,

> The Institutes is a thoroughly subversive work in need of liberation from the pallid articles and monographs that in their pedantry lose sight of the book's breadth. Calvin understood exactly what he had written, and until his last days he hesitated to utter the conclusion he knew he had led others to draw: the ungodly and unrighteous rulers of the earth had everything to fear from the Gospel. Those who oppose God can expect his wrath, while those who hear his voice, show compassion, and seek justice will possess God forever. The message is uncompromising, but in times of persecution and exile, moral and political chaos, and personal tragedy—the very times in which the Institutes found its first readers—who derives comfort from equivocation?

Calvin's father wanted him to become a lawyer but after "a conversion experience to the Gospel," he abandoned law and began writing in Basel, where Erasmus lived. Gordon says they most likely never met but Erasmus's influence on Calvin "was pervasive." Calvin settled in Geneva, after being run out of town the first time, became a pastor and wrote the *Institutes*, among many other books, to teach, "people what they need to know of true doctrine and how to read the Bible," and through it, "exhorted them to lives of piety." He asked to be, and was buried in, an unmarked grave. Eight editions of the *Institutes* were published in all, five in Latin, three in French, Calvin adding to and rearranging the text as he approached it afresh.

The book has been vilified, mostly by those who have not read it (a common phenomenon among book critics), occasionally has dropped out of sight—but then often reappeared to be wrestled with and taken in surprising directions by Reformed German theologians such as Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Gordon calls them "titans." They fought bitterly (a common phenomenon among lovers of the Most High) over the correct interpretation of Calvin's theology.

Gordon covers the history of the *Institutes* in America, Europe, and then, perhaps surprisingly, in China, where many intellectual Reformed Christians have studied it. The last chapter of Gordon's book describes how Afrikaners used the *Institutes* to justify apartheid—and how notable theologians such as Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu, seconded by Barth, who called apartheid "Nazi-Theology," shattered apartheid's supposed Christian basis.

Gordon also discusses how modern American writers such as John Updike and Marilynne Robinson have surprised many an unwary reader by writing about John Calvin. He firmly reminds us John Calvin's *Institutes* is not just for Puritans.

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